

Mission Unstoppable

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[0 : 0 0] Well, in 2010, there was a lesser-known movie release starring Denzel Washington and Chris Pine, and it was called Unstoppable. It was about a train that ran away, headed for a town, and they had to try and stop it. It's not a bad movie, actually.

But like a lot of Hollywood movies, it says on the next slide there, underneath Unstoppable, called Inspired by True Events. It's not even based on true events, it's inspired by true events.

So I guess that means there was a train. That'll do. We've got a movie. Actually, to be fair to Hollywood, there was actually a runaway train in Ohio back in 2001, and it travelled uncontrolled for two hours, actually.

But today's passage would make for a great Hollywood movie, and you'll see that as it's read in a moment, but it's not about a runaway train, it's about a runaway ship.

But it's not a ship that is unstoppable. A sandbar does a pretty good job of stopping the ship, as we'll see. But rather, it's God's Word and God's mission that's unstoppable.

[1 : 1 2] Now, again, it's a long reading, but it's worth hearing. And so a bit like last week, we'll hear it all read, and then rather than working through the text verse by verse, which we often rightly do, I'll highlight a few things and make the big points and what it means for us.

There are no big speeches by characters this week, so we're not going to have the people out the front like last week. Rather, our readers will follow the stages of Paul's journey.

So they're a bit uneven in the readings, from the first ship to the second ship with the storm, to the island, and then to the third ship, which basically takes him to Rome.

And as the readers read, notice how Luke does two things. He packs it full of details, names and so on, and he packs it full of difficulties.

So notice that as the reading goes. So here's the reading, page number 1122. So it'd be great if you could look up in your Bibles or listen as we go. And so we're starting with the first part of the journey, Luke chapter 27.

[2 : 2 8] And I'll read 1 to 5 before Mavis takes over for the exciting part. So he's just finished his defense to King Agrippa last week.

And then verse 1. And when it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the imperial regiment.

We boarded a ship from Amidratum, about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us.

The next day we landed at Sidon, and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so that they might provide for his needs. From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us.

When we had sailed across the open sea off the coasts of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. Then the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board.

- [3 : 52] We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving in Snidus. When the wind didn't allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone.
- We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fairhavens near the town of La Sia. Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was the day after atonement.
- So Paul warned them, Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo and to our own lives also.
- But this centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. Since the harbour was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided they should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there.
- This was a harbour in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest. When a gentle south wind began to blow, they saw their opportunity, so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.
- [5 : 10] But before very long, a wind of hurricane force called the Northeaster swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and couldn't head into the wind, so we gave way to it and were driven along.
- As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cayuda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure, so the men hoisted it aboard. Then they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together.
- Because they were afraid they would run aground on the sandbars of Cytus, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard.
- On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of ever being saved.
- After they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said, Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete.
- [6 : 31] Then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage because not one of you will be lost. Only the ship will be destroyed.
- Last night, an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, Do not be afraid, Paul.
- You must stand trial before Caesar and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you. So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.
- Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island. On the 14th night, we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea when about midnight, the sailors sensed they were approaching land.
- They took soundings and found that the water was 40 metres deep. A short time later, they took soundings again and found it was 30 metres deep. Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight.
- [7 : 46] In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and soldiers, Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.
- So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away. Just before dawn, Paul urged them all to eat.
- For the last 14 days, he said, you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food. You haven't eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food.

You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from your head. After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all.

Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether, there were 276 of us on board.

[8 : 56] When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea. When daylight came, they didn't recognise the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could.

Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach.

But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow struck fast and wouldn't move and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf.

The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan.

He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to the land. The rest were to get there on planks or on other pieces of the ship.

[10 : 08] And in this way, everyone reached the land safely. Once safely on shore, we found out the island was called Malta.

The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand.

When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, this man must be a murderer. For though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live.

But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead. But after waiting for a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was the god.

There was a state nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and showed us generosity, generous hospitality for three days.

[11 : 32] His father was ill in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him.

When this happened, the rest of those on the island who were ill came and were cured. They honoured us in many ways and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with supplies, we needed.

After three months, we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island. It was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods, Castor and Pollux. We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days.

From there, we set sail and arrived in Regium. The next day, the south wind came up and on the following day, we reached Petoli. There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them and in this way, we came to Rome.

The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming and they travelled as far as Forum of Appius and the three taverns to meet us. At the sight of these people, Paul thanked God and was encouraged.

[12 : 39] When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself with a soldier to guard him. What a story. Thank you to our readers, but it's a great story.

It would make for a great Hollywood movie, wouldn't it? But unlike the movie we started with, the train story, Unstoppable, that's inspired by true events, what we're reading are actual true events.

In other words, what we're reading is a historical story. Point one on your outlines. Now Luke claims to have been there and lived through these events, which is why he writes we did this or we did that.

That is, it's his eyewitness account that we're reading. And we can tell it's true. By the way, he has packed it full of details. One of the things I asked you to look out for.

Did you notice all the details? Details like names of places. Places we can see on a map like the map that I've put on your outlines which traces the journey and the dotted line is where they've got no control but are driven by the sea.

[13 : 57] Places we can still visit even today. Places, oh sorry, names of people as well we are told. Lots of them which suggests Luke met them.

Plus he gives us details of weather patterns like the Great Nor'easter. Plus details about the ship like how the sailors sought to avoid the sandbars in Sirtus off the coast of Libya.

Something that is backed up by historical sources today. Or how they sought to survive the storm by throwing the cargo overboard as something that sailors often practiced in those conditions.

And then they even tried to jump ship when they thought they were going to die. Something that sailors still did in that day as well. Plus there are details about numbers like the numbers of passengers which is not unusual for big ships of those days.

Plus numbers of how many days in the storm and how many days here and so on. It's packed full of details isn't it? Which point to someone who was there.

[15 : 01] As a sailor and a writer put it, James Smith, he says, no man not a sailor could have written a narrative of a sea voyage so consistent with reality in all its parts unless they were actually there, unless from actual observation.

Another minister I know was talking to a professor of history emeritus at King's College in London, so pretty prestigious. Her name is Professor Anne Duggan and he asked her if she considered the books of the New Testament as historical documents.

And her reply, of course, not a Christian. And the conversation moved on and so he didn't get a chance to follow up so he emailed her later and asked her why with particular reference to Acts because he was going to be speaking through Acts himself.

And she wrote back saying, Luke's writings conform to the structure of authentic historical writing. He is careful to distinguish between what he learnt from others and what he witnessed himself.

He is careful to locate events in specific times and places like the map. He writes with an expressed purpose that we may have confidence to know these things.

[16 : 18] And then she adds these are the things historians look for whether it's medieval history which is her area of expertise or ancient Roman history which is when Luke was writing in.

And then she added at the end all pretty obvious really. To which the minister friend said, thank you, thank you very much. In fact, it's one of the things that separates Christianity from all other religions.

The fact that it's claimed to have taken place in history with real people and real dates. It's not a myth. And knowing this actually helps people come to faith in it, to believe it.

And so a guy who was a couple of years behind me at Bible College has a father who is a Hindu and a mother who is a Buddhist. And so he knew a bit about other religions, certainly those two.

But then he became interested in a girl, as it happens, and she was a Christian. And so she said, well actually, you need to be a Christian, so why don't you come to church?

[17 : 25] And he did. But then he said that he was so bored that he wanted to count the bricks at church. But it was a bit like here, it was painted, so he couldn't count them. And so instead he turned to the back of his Bible where they often have those maps, like I think these ones have some maps as well, I can't remember now, but Bibles often have maps in the back.

And as he was looking at these maps, he realized, he said, as I looked at the maps, I started to realize this is unlike any religious belief I'd encountered before. Christianity involved real places, real dates, real people.

And then he wondered if they are all real events. And long story short, that led him to listen to the gospel and become a Christian.

He's now ministering in Singapore. Christianity is not a myth like so many other religions, nor written by one person in a cave somewhere. No, no, no.

It happened in history. And so these are not inspired by true events. These are actual true events. And so we can have confidence in its reliability like other scripture and the New Testament in particular.

[18 : 38] This is a historical story. It's also though a theological story, point two. In other words, it's about God. Luke wants us to see God's hand that ensures God's mission.

God is able to keep his word to Paul for his mission in Rome, no matter what. That's why Luke packs it full of difficulties.

You see, he could have just written, our trip was dangerous, then we made it to Rome, the end. That would have made Mavis' job a whole lot easier, wouldn't it, than reading that long account.

But Luke deliberately packs it full of these difficulties they faced to show us that nothing could stop God from keeping his word to Paul for his mission in Rome.

You see, as early as chapter 9, when Paul first becomes a Christian, the Lord Jesus said to Ananias that this man Paul is his chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings.

[19 : 51] Gentiles are of course non-Jews, and what greater Gentile king was there than the Roman Emperor Caesar himself? And what better place is there to see the gospel go out to the ends of the world than the capital of the known world, Rome itself?

And so the Lord Jesus said to him, as we saw this a couple of weeks ago, he stood near Paul and said, take courage, as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, you must also testify in Rome.

As Peter Young rightly pointed out a few weeks ago, this promise to Paul here in chapter 23 really sets the scene for the rest of the book of Acts. But it was quite a journey to get to Rome, wasn't it?

Have you ever noticed how things in life rarely go smoothly? Or is that just me? No? You've noticed this too? How much less so for Paul? I mean, humanly speaking, he should not have made it to Rome, should he?

I mean, he faced loads of difficulties, like the foolishness of people, like the captain, the pilot, and the owner in verses 9 to 11. Paul had already seen how dangerous it was, and that winter was approaching, because it's already after the Day of Atonement, and so, you know, October heading into November, November for them was winter, and so he says, look, it's going to be dangerous, let's not do it, yet the centurion listens to the pilot and owner, who perhaps thought they knew better, or more likely wanted their money, money for the grain they were carrying, plus the bonus, the emperor offered all ships who sailed in dangerous seas to get the grain to Rome.

[21 : 35] We've got historical sources that talk about that. Either way, they foolishly set sail, and so this meant, before long, Paul was in a huge storm with wind and rain like a hurricane, and they were driven out to sea, which then meant Paul faced death.

For after many days of this storm, in verse 20, with neither sun nor stars to guide them and help them know where they are, Paul is lost at sea, and even Luke himself says he has lost all hope of being saved.

He thought he would die. But then one night an angel appears to Paul, and the very next day, he stands up and says, men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete, then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss.

It kind of sounds like Paul is rubbing it in, doesn't it? But he's not actually, because if that was his purpose to rub it in, he could have said it on the first day of the storm, and the second day and the third day to really rub it in.

But no, he says it at this point, because he now wants them to listen to him this time. As he says, but I urge you to keep your courage, because not one of you will be lost, only the ship will be destroyed.

[22 : 52] Last night an angel of God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me and said, do not be afraid, Paul, you must stand trial before Caesar, the Roman emperor.

And God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you, so keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be happened just as he told me.

And yet despite this, despite pointing out that he was right and they should listen, in verse 30, the sailors refuse to listen and try and mutiny. They pretend to lower down the boat or to put some anchors down, but really they're trying to escape.

And then Paul faced the shipwreck itself with the threat of being drowned by the surf. And then once the ship kind of broke apart, the threat of being murdered by the soldiers, verse 42.

And when they finally make it to shore on Malta, he builds a fire and is bitten by a viper, faces death yet again. And yet in spite of all this, we read finally at the end, he gets to Rome.

[24 : 04] How on earth did he get there? I mean, humanly speaking, it's impossible, isn't it? But not divinely speaking.

For God is able to keep his word to Paul, which is really about God's mission in Rome for Paul. You see, his word to Paul, and the reason he saves Paul is so that his gospel might be proclaimed by Paul.

In other words, Luke wants us to see that God is able to keep his word and advance his mission no matter what. He's able to do it even when it seems impossible.

Do you know what movie this music is from? No?

Some of you. It's the Mission Impossible movies where they have a mission and that is impossible, but it then becomes possible because of Tom Cruise.

[25 : 18] Good old Tom Cruise. There's nothing impossible for him it seems. Well, when the bad decisions and the storm should have made Paul's journey and God's mission in Rome impossible, I mean there was a deadly obstacle at every turn, wasn't there?

It was possible. Not because of Tom Cruise, but because of God's hand. This is not just Mission Possible, as our sermon series title says, it's Mission Unstoppable.

Because God's hand is in it. He's able to keep his word for his mission. So neither wind nor rain, neither storm nor tempest, neither mutinous ploys by sailors, nor murderous plans by soldiers, neither the breaking of the ship in the surf, nor the viper on the beach, nothing is able to stop God's word or God's mission.

But why is God so bent on his mission moving forward? Well, as you know, so more people might be saved. In fact, the word save comes up a lot in this part of Acts.

It's not always translated in our English versions. Sometimes it says safely and so on, but it comes up lots. Now, of course, it's referring to being saved from physical death because of the storm or soldiers, but Luke uses it so often to remind us, I think, that Paul must testify about Jesus so people can be saved from spiritual death because of our sin.

[26 : 57] That is saved from hell. God's mission is to see more people saved, to build his church for his glory, through his gospel being proclaimed.

And it's because God is able to keep his word for his mission that it's mission unstoppable. You see, this is a historical story. It is reliable. It's a theological story.

It tells us God is unstoppable. He's able. But it's also an applicable story. It's useful to teach us. And for it firstly teaches us to have faith in God's word, point three.

And that's what Paul did. Do you remember that verse I read before in verse 25? He has the vision and then he says, I have faith in God that it will happen just as his word told me.

Paul has faith in God's word to him that he'll make it to Rome. And we have even more reason to have faith in God's word to us.

[28 : 01] For as we've seen, it's reliable. And God is able to keep it no matter what. Like his promise to Paul.

Of course, God has not promised that we will testify in Rome. But he has promised us lots of other things in his word. Things to non-Christians, for example, like the famous John 3.16, that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish.

Their souls will not perish, but live on eternally. And on the last day, will receive a new body with that soul to enjoy the world to come.

This is God's promise to all people. And if you don't yet believe in Jesus, then why not? God's word is reliable.

And God is able to keep it. And for us who do, God has promised us lots of other things, like his way to live is for our good.

[29 : 05] We can believe that even when our world disagrees with that. Or God's promise to us is to work in all things for our good, which is to make us like Jesus.

And we can believe that even when it's hard to see that in the midst of our suffering and trials. Actually, I think the bit we find hardest to believe in that promise is that our ultimate good is not being healthy and wealthy.

It's being like Jesus. Often, that's the bit we find hard to believe because our world defines good differently, doesn't it? But God defines our good to be like Jesus.

Or God promises us eternal glory that will make any suffering we face now worth it. We can believe his word to us that we might keep following Jesus through life's ups and downs.

confidence. And so, have faith in God's word to us. For it's reliable and God is able to keep it. And second, this passage teaches us to have confidence in God's mission for us.

[30 : 18] Because it's unstoppable. You see, as we saw, God's word to Paul in this passage is really about God's mission for Paul in Rome. And to keep speaking the good news of Jesus that more might be saved.

And as we saw, God's word for God's mission is unstoppable. Now, I know sharing the gospel or the good news of Jesus sometimes feels like it's not worthwhile.

Whether it's because it's nerve-wracking, I get nervous as well. I don't know if you've ever experienced that. You know, you're kind of wanting to talk about Jesus and, you know, the kind of heart starts pounding a bit faster.

And then you're not sure what to say. And then when you go away, you realize, oh, I should have said this or I should have said that. Has this ever happened to people? It's happened to me. And so you wonder, is this worthwhile?

Or you wonder if it's worthwhile because your family and friends are just not interested when you do try and talk to them or invite them to a Meet Jesus Sunday service, for example. Or worse, they just stubbornly refuse to even look at the evidence when there's plenty there.

[31 : 23] Or whether it's because our world seems to be against us and so it doesn't seem to be worthwhile. I don't know if you heard about the Paris Olympic Games opening ceremony just recently, last week, I think.

They decided to recreate Leonardo da Vinci's picture of the Last Supper with drag queens. And so that's what the picture at the top, it's a bit hard to see. It got a bit worse.

But one American commentator, who I don't think is a Christian, he said this. He said, this is crazy. Opening your event by replacing Jesus and the disciples at the Last Supper with men in drag.

There are 2.4 billion Christians on earth and apparently the Olympics wanted to declare loudly to all of them, right out of the gate, not welcome. They also raised the Olympic flag upside down so the whole thing was a bit of a schmuzzle.

But it can feel like sharing the gospel is an uphill battle, can't it? That it's not worthwhile, but this passage gives us confidence that it is worthwhile.

[32 : 28] For if God's hand is in God's mission, then no one can stop it, not even the Olympics. For his gospel will continue to go out and his church will continue to be built.

As Jesus himself said, I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. And so it's worth getting on board with it. I started with the train movie called Unstoppable, but they eventually stopped it after a couple of hours and so maybe they should have called the movie Eventually Stoppable.

But God's mission is actually unstoppable because God's hand is in it. And it's no runaway train that kills people, but it's the good news of Jesus that saves people.

And so have confidence to get on board with this mission in whatever way you can. To, for example, pray for people. To keep praying for people. To invite people to our Meet Jesus Sunday services or other services like Christmas.

I know Christmas is a lot more, we think it's a long way away, but this year has gone so fast, hasn't it? It'll be here before we know it. Even to speak to people. Like if the opening ceremony comes up in conversation, say, yeah, I think it was actually more insulting to Jesus who died for them.

[33 : 47] See what they say. This is a historical story for it's reliable. It's a theological story because it tells us God is able. And it's an applicable story for it's useful to teach us to have faith in God's word to us and confidence in God's mission for us.

Let's pray. We'll have both. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you for this story that is exciting, packed full of drama.

But we thank you also that it's a historical story, that it's a theological story, teaches us about you. And it also is a useful story to teach us to have faith in your word, for you are able to keep it and it is reliable, and to have confidence in your mission.

Because no matter what we face, it is unstoppable. Help us to do these things, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.